

**"The system
doesn't involve
people or appear
to be relevant to
people's lives."**

**citizens
advice**

Going with the grain
Why democracy needs to fit
with modern life

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Executive summary

For many people, the word 'democracy' will conjure up images of ballot boxes, community halls and an 'x' in a box. Some may think of the Houses of Parliament, the rowdy debate of Prime Minister's Questions or the door of Number 10 Downing Street. Others may imagine town halls, school classrooms, or the back room of a pub where local debates and campaign groups meet. Or perhaps you think of public marches, local petitions, media and online forums, or the many different ways people come together to debate or protest an issue.

Whatever form it takes, democracy is a commitment to giving people influence over decisions or services that affect their lives. It informs the mechanics and processes of Government and public services, such as dealing with complaints, responding to feedback or consulting on change; we hold decision-makers and politicians to account, through transparency of information, voting for leaders, or raising concerns; and it shapes the institutions that represent us, from Unions and political parties to interest groups, newspapers and campaigns.

Though we may think about democracy only in an occasional moment at the ballot box, our ability as citizens to shape the services, decisions and communities that we consume, live and work within depends on having the right tools and opportunities to engage day-to-day. We may not be aware of it when things are working well, but we want to be able to help fix problems or have an influence if we want a different outcome.

At Citizens Advice, we see the challenges people face when things go wrong. Every day we help over 7,300 people to solve problems - that's almost 2 million people every year through our local community services and millions more online and on the phone. We see how frustrated people can be when they are not able to fix something themselves, or get through on the phone, or get the information they need. Yet we also see how willing people are to help each other, to give their time to volunteer, and make a difference in their communities.

This is the frontline of democracy. Far away from the politics of Westminster, citizens are getting involved in running local services, contributing to communities, volunteering their time, debating issues and feeding back. Whilst we have seen a steady decline in participation in the 'formal' institutions of democracy - party membership, voter turnout, trust in politics - engagement in

wider civic life remains strong. Making democracy work is as much about improving the services, processes and tools to support everyday decision-making and influence, as it is about voting systems and constitutions.

This report argues that to build stronger communities, change people's attitudes towards politics, and improve participation, we need to improve the democratic services and processes that people interact with everyday. To do so, we need to understand how day-to-day pressures, challenges and behaviours are affecting people's experience, how they want to engage, and how services and processes can be more responsive to people's needs and go with the grain of modern life.

We conducted a nationally representative survey to examine how people want to have an influence over decisions, and their experience of this 'day-to-day democracy' through the services, processes and tools designed to support it.

We found that whilst many people are committed to making a difference and getting involved in their communities, heaping pressures and a growing sense of personal and financial insecurity are widening the perceived divide between the politics of Westminster, the devolved assemblies, and the Town Hall and the day-to-day reality of most people's lives. More worryingly, the political system is failing to promote the values and characteristics of citizenship that the population upholds.

We found evidence of two 'biases' in the design of democratic processes that make it difficult for many people to engage:

Firstly, the financial security bias. Citizens are facing new pressures and challenges. Though the economy is in recovery, at Citizens Advice we are seeing trends towards increasing household debt,¹ fragile employment,² and poor experience of services³. Only 26 per cent of the population report feeling confident about their financial security over the coming years.

¹ Pardoe, A et al. (2015) *Unsecured and insecure?: Exploring the UK's mountain of unsecured debt - and how it affects people's lives*. Citizens Advice
<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/Global/CitizensAdvice/Debt%20and%20Money%20Publications/UnsecuredorinsecureFinal.pdf>

² Hignell, K (2015) *Second Choice Jobs: The real life impact of the changing world of work*. Citizens Advice
https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/global/migrated_documents/corporate/second-choice-jobs-final-1-.pdf

³ Citizens Advice (2015) *Advice trends 2011-2015 A four-year snapshot of client statistics of the Citizens Advice service in England and Wales*
<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/Global/Public/Advice%20trends/Advice-trends-four-year-snapshot-2011-2015.pdf>

People's perceptions of financial security are affecting their attitudes to and involvement with democratic processes and institutions. This may be because those who do not feel financially secure lacked the headspace to engage with issues that don't feel immediately relevant to their own lives, or do battle with overly complicated democratic processes.

Secondly, the assertive bias. A lack of confidence is a major barrier to people trying to engage with processes and take action. Some may be too nervous to participate or seek influence and change if it requires standing up at public meetings, particularly where politics can be seen as an 'experts only' space.

Beyond a conscious barrier, throughout the data we found that those who didn't identify as assertive were less likely to engage, seek to influence, or complain when things went wrong. Citizens perceive democratic channels for influence as largely public or combative, which turns off a majority of the public.

Despite recent surges of energy and engagement, we face a democratic deficit. Party membership is in long-term decline, voting turnout is low and formal democratic processes are seen as irrelevant and outdated. Citizens feel frustrated and alienated as democratic processes are unresponsive and frustrating to engage with, demanding time, headspace and confidence to push change through.

Rebalancing this deficit means making democracy work for people, reshaping processes and services around how people live and behave.

There's no silver bullet, but we recommend some design principles that should guide local councils, public services and democratic institutions to ensure that the tools and services they offer to support public engagement provide:

- **Information:** All public information should be published and presented so that it is as easily accessible and understandable as possible;
- **Accessibility:** Democratic processes and channels for influence should be co-located in the places where people spend time;
- **Experience:** User experience and journey should be at the centre of all democratic processes and channels for influence.

Democracy: decline and surge?

The past year and a half has offered a mixed diagnosis on the health of our democracy. In the year of a General Election, amidst major programmes of devolution and constitutional reforms, and the shift to an individual electoral registration system, debates about the strength and legitimacy of Britain's democratic structures and institutions have ranged wide.⁴

This has been in the context of a long-term decline in participation in 'formal' democratic processes and institutions: membership of either the Conservative, Labour or the Liberal Democrat parties has quartered over the last three decades, and the UK now has one of the lowest rates of party membership in Europe;⁵ voter turnout is on a long-term downward trend;⁶ and faith in politicians is in decline, with only one in ten believing they try to do the best by the country.⁷

On the other hand, the past 18 months has seen pockets of democratic energy and enthusiasm. The Scottish Independence Referendum brought policy debates about identity and devolution into homes across the country, leading to high registration and an over 85 per cent turnout.⁸ Although Scotland didn't vote for independence, the strength of feeling brought forward an almost clean sweep for the Scottish National Party in Scotland in May 2015. Much attention during the General Election was focused on the sharp rises in support for the

⁴ For example, the Government is also proposing constitutional change in the form of English Votes for English Laws to address the so-called 'West Lothian question': the situation whereby English MPs cannot vote on matters which have been devolved to other nations of the UK, but representatives from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland can vote on matters affecting England only. These proposed reforms will effectively give MPs for constituencies in England a veto over English-only legislation (or MPs for constituencies in England and Wales a veto of England and Wales only legislation)

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/441848/English_votes_for_english_laws_explanatory_guide.pdf.

⁵ Keen, R (2015) Membership of UK Political Parties - House of Commons Library Briefing Paper Number SN05125 <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN05125>

⁶ See UK turnout data from International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA): <http://www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?CountryCode=GB>

⁷ YouGov/University of Southampton:

http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/fgirha0j0e/YG-Archive-141028-UniOfSouthampton.pdf

⁸ Electoral Commission (2014) *Scottish Independence Referendum: Report on the referendum held on 18 September 2014*

http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/179812/Scottish-independence-referendum-report.pdf

smaller parties, such as UKIP and the Greens. And the surprise election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader has seen the party's membership swell.

These moments of democratic engagement are noteworthy precisely because they stand in contrast to the longer-term trend of decline. They may have captivated public attention because they represent a departure from what is perceived as politics-as-usual.

In this context, a key question for everyone concerned with the health of our democracy is: how do we change people's attitudes towards politics and make democracy work better for citizens everyday? This report hopes to contribute towards answering this question.

Methodology

This report includes analysis from a nationally representative survey (Civic Life Survey) examining public attitudes to and engagement in a variety of democratic processes, services and institutions, assessing how well these fit with people's behaviour, interests and preferences, and their experience of engaging with them. This was an online survey of 2,025 UK adults, carried out between 15 and 29 December 2014.

As part of this survey, we also carried out a segmentation analysis of the data set, using statistical drivers to cluster the respondents into different groups. The survey and segmentation were both carried out by Box Clever Consulting.

This report also draws on client data from Citizens Advice's face to face, online and phone services.

Box 1: The Citizens Advice Service

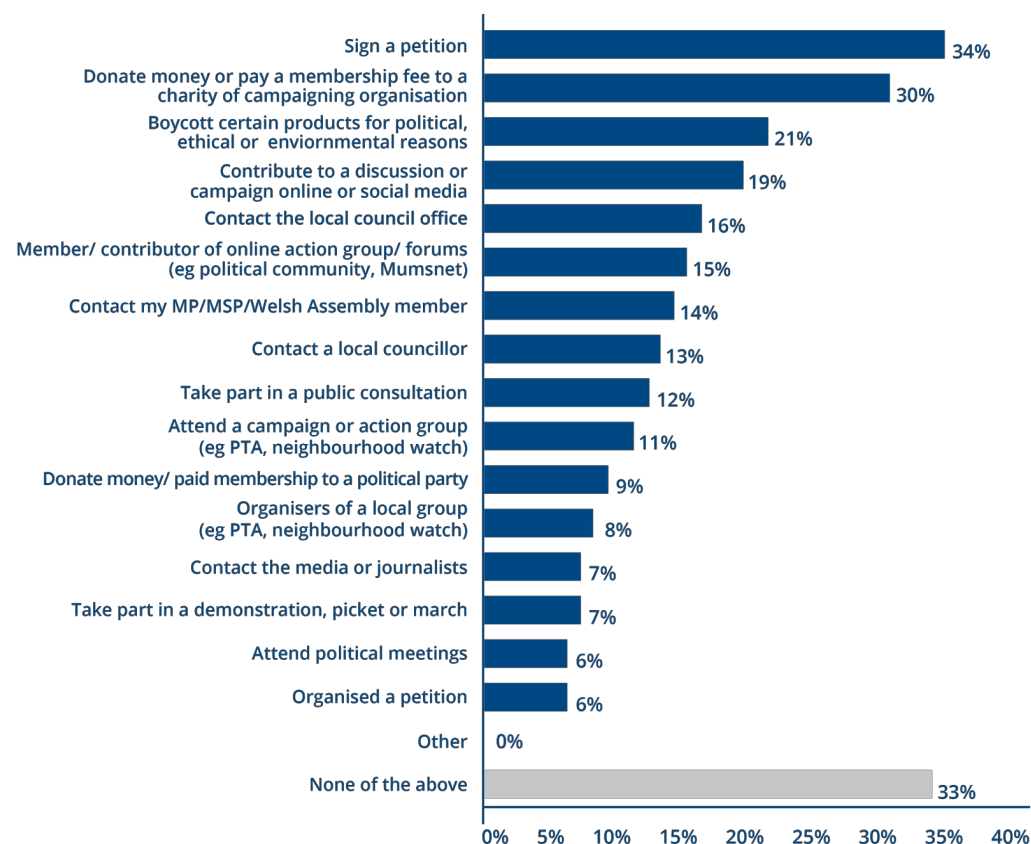
At Citizens Advice we help people to solve their problems by providing free, independent, confidential and impartial advice. We deliver this service online, over the phone, and face-to-face from 2,500 locations in communities across England and Wales. In 2014/15, we helped 2.5 million people with 6.2 million issues, and our work was made possible by the contribution of 21,600 dedicated, highly trained volunteers. In 2014-15 we generated £361 million in fiscal benefits and 2.1 billion in wider social value. We also generated £2.6 billion directly for our clients.

Part 1: The British public are committed to making a difference

Despite the current sense of dissatisfaction with formal politics and democracy, many people are committed to making a difference and getting involved in their communities. People seek to make a difference in a wide range of ways.

The desire to contribute and make a difference is widespread

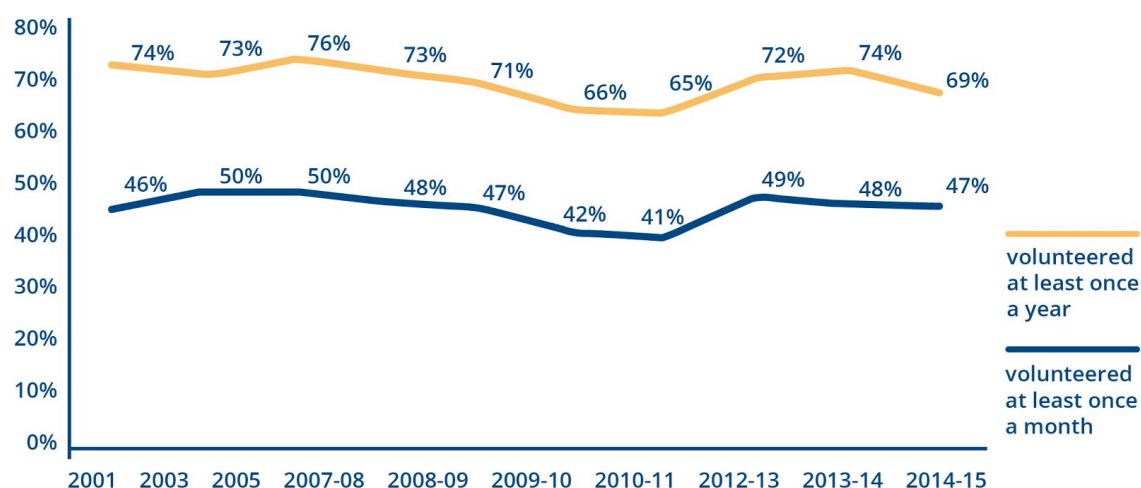
The majority of the British public feel a sense of duty to give back and make a difference. Rather than largely self-interested, we found that the notable majority of people recognise their personal responsibility to contribute something back to society, with almost half (45 per cent) of respondents turning this commitment into action. Amongst those who have been active, the most common form of action is signing a petition, as you can see from the chart below.



▲ Figure 1: Percentages who participated in different activities when they felt strongly about an issue in the last 3 months. Source: Civic Life Survey. Base: All involved in activities (1,254).⁹

⁹ Respondents could select more than one option

Government data on volunteering reinforces this picture of rich civic participation. In 2014-15, 69 per cent of people in England volunteered at least once and almost half (47 per cent) of people volunteered at least once a month.¹⁰ And this commitment to giving back is an enduring feature of the British public; as the chart below illustrates, participation rates have remained relatively stable over the past decade and more.



▲ Figure 2: Percentage of people who volunteered at least once a month and once in the last year, 2001-15. Source: Community Life Survey.

The public is generous in giving money, as well as time. Three quarters of people in England regularly donate to charity, and - at £22 - this year the average monthly contribution was at its highest since the Community Life Survey began collecting this data.¹¹

So what explains the sense of alienation from formal politics?

If citizens uphold a strong sense of personal responsibility, what is driving so many people to have such negative views about politics and feel that it is not worth them getting involved? What is leading many to disengage from formal democratic processes and channels for influence, while remaining engaged in a richer set of civic activities?

In the next three chapters, we show that many people are feeling alienated from unresponsive democratic processes and services, leading to disengagement, frustration and growing distance between the institutions of democracy and politics and the day-to-day reality of most people's lives.

¹⁰ Cabinet Office (2015) *Community Life Survey: 2014-15. Statistical Bulletin*
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/447010/Community_Life_Survey_2014-15_Bulletin.pdf

¹¹ Ibid

Part 2: Democratic processes feel out of sync with people's lives

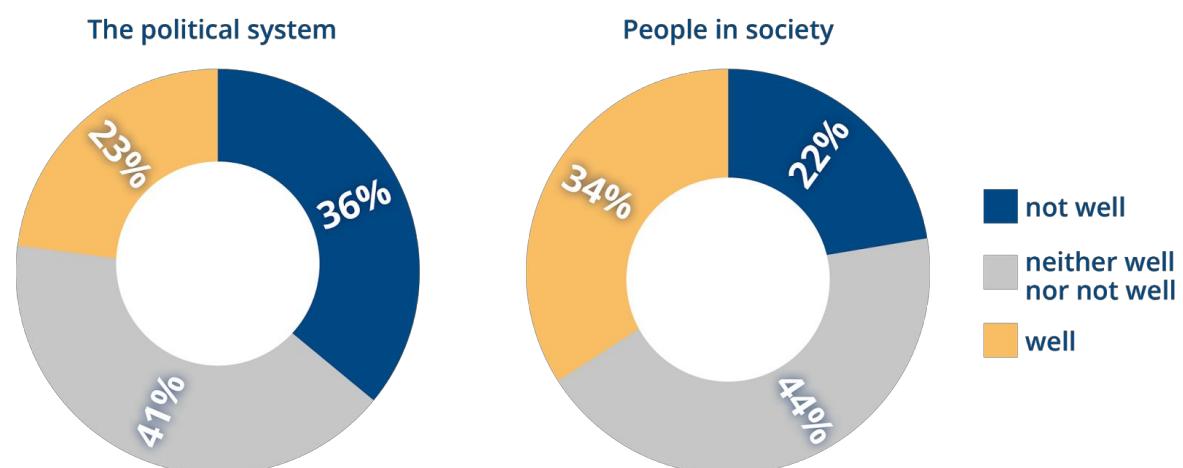
"The system doesn't involve people or appear to be relevant to people's lives."

It is well recognised that there is an antipathy amongst the general public towards politicians and the 'formal' institutions of democracy. We similarly found that people have more trust that their peers will behave responsibly than the political system.

But our research found that this frustration wasn't confined to Westminster or MPs. There was frustration felt at local democratic processes which don't resonate with personal priorities, demand too much time and effort, and feel outdated in comparison to other consumer services and processes.

Citizens don't think the political classes reflect their values and behaviours

Despite the British public's commitment to giving back and making a difference, there is a perception this commitment is not supported or upheld by the political system. Over a third (36 per cent) of people think the political system fails to promote or value responsible behaviours, compared to almost a quarter (23 per cent) who think the system succeeds in doing so. The opposite is the case when the question is applied to the wider public: over a third (34 per cent) say that society promotes these values well, with 22 per cent who disagree.



▲ Figure 3: Percentage who think responsible behaviours are well promoted or valued by people in society and by the political system. Source: Civic Life Survey. Base: All respondents (2,025).

A healthy democracy depends on more than just electoral participation; it also relies on the commitment to civic contribution on the part of its citizens. A majority of the British public are committed to civic responsibility, but do not see this promoted and valued by the political system. This perceived 'values gap' between the people and the system poses some serious challenges for our politics and democracy.

If the responsible civic behaviours democracy relies on are not fostered and upheld by the political system, then we risk depleting the collective reserves of energy and enthusiasm we will need to sustain a healthy democracy in the future. The British public currently endorses civic contribution *despite* not seeing this reflected in formal politics; there is no guarantee this will last forever.

Moreover, the fact the considerable civic energy that exists in the country is not channelled or reflected in formal politics represents a massive wasted opportunity. Having a politics that goes with the grain of people's lives and harnesses the potential of their commitments is desirable in itself, but it is especially important in an age of strained services and tight budgets.

Box 2: Local Citizens Advice - harnessing civic energy

An 'anchor institution' is generally understood to be a non-profit organisation of strategic importance to the local economy and society which, due to its mission and ties to the community, is unlikely to move location. Examples of anchor institutions include universities, public libraries, and hospitals, and work has been done to consider the role of anchor institutions in supporting local economies and small business growth and development. But how might anchor institutions also foster local civic and political engagement and influence?

Through working with local volunteers, campaigning on local issues, and collaborating with local organisations and agencies, Citizens Advice offices across England and Wales harness civic energy and channel it to raise awareness around and address the problems that local people face. By providing the infrastructure and support, local Citizens Advice helps citizens to organise and take responsibility for their lives and have influence over the issues that matter to them.

The public's attitudes towards democratic processes become increasingly negative the further away decisions are made

"Politics feels quite distant"

Perhaps to be expected, many of those who acknowledged a 'values gap' between people and politics attributed this to well-established negative attitudes about "corrupt" politicians and a "self-serving" elite. Respondents were disenchanted by politicians being "in for what they can get, not what they can do", caring "only about their own interests", and "behaving irresponsibly and often breaking the law". This anger is exacerbated because politicians aren't viewed as "answerable to the public."

More interestingly, many respondents discussed the distance they felt between politics and their own lives.

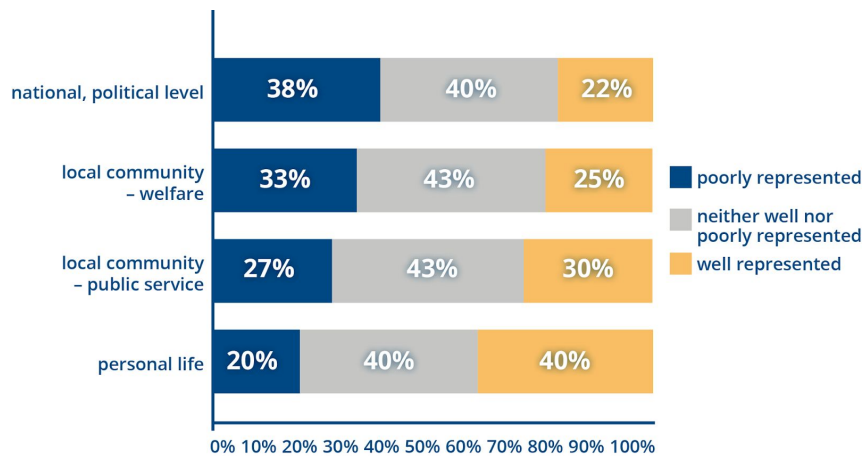
"Politicians are too remote from people"

"People feel distanced from the political elite who seem to have no grasp of what the general public think and feel"

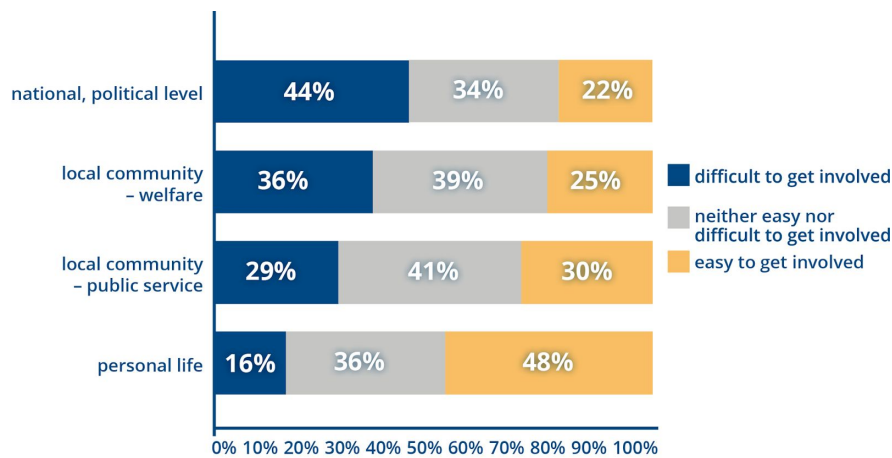
"Politicians are too remote from the real world"

Negative attitudes towards democratic processes worsen as decision making becomes more remote, a trend that is replicated when we asked about how well represented people feel, how easy individuals feel it is to get involved in decision making, and their level of influence in different areas of life. This finding mirrors data from sources such as the Hansard Society's *Audit of Political Engagement* which suggest that people generally feel they have more influence at the local, as opposed to the national, level.¹²

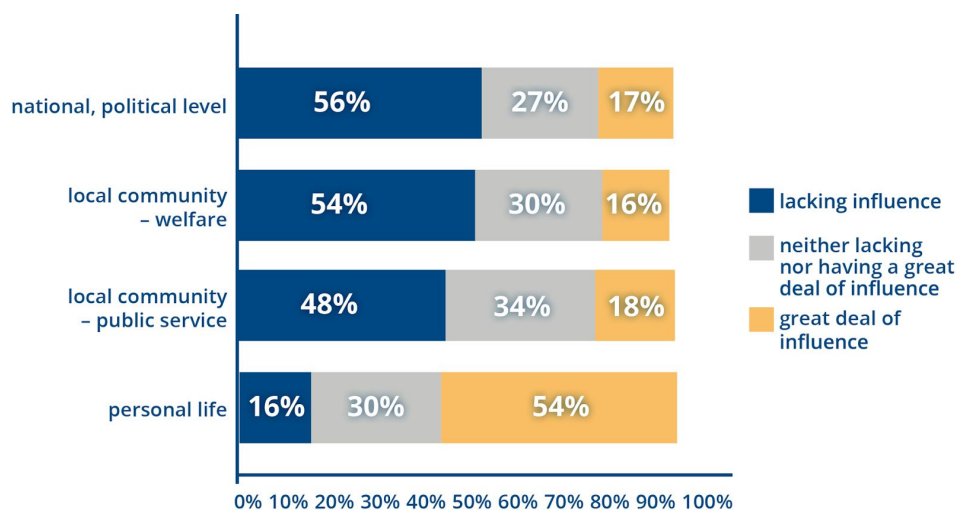
¹² Hansard Society (2015) *Audit of Political Engagement 12*:
<http://www.auditofpoliticalengagement.org/media/reports/Audit-of-Political-Engagement-12-2015.pdf>



▲ Figure 4: Percentage who feel well/poorly represented in different areas. Source: Civic Life Survey. Base: All respondents (2,025).



▲ Figure 5: Percentage who find it easy/difficult to get involved in different areas. Source: Civic Life Survey. Base: All respondents (2,025).



▲ Figure 6: Percentage who feel they lack/have a great deal of influence in different areas. Source: Civic Life Survey. Base: All respondents (2,025).

People experience public services and welfare services within their local communities, and we wanted to gauge whether people had different attitudes to each service in a local context. We found a consistent difference in attitudes to public services - such as education and health - and welfare services - such as the job centre. Public services elicit less negative views than welfare, across representation, involvement and influence. In fact, as you can see from figures 4 to 6, citizens are slightly more positive than negative about public services in all respects other than influence. People's impressions of welfare services in the form of the job centre and benefit decisions, however, are negative across the board. Respondents referred to a welfare system in which "nobody really listens", and "which makes you feel worthless and not heard". A number of comments also mentioned the rigidity of the system, and the desire to be "treated as an individual and not a statistic".

"The whole system is determined nationally, with all the absurdities associated with it. At local level it's only implementation, not policy making."

Box 3: Can devolution work if local democratic processes remain frustrating?

The Government has embarked on a 'devolution revolution', transferring powers from Whitehall to the nations, counties and city regions of the UK. It has announced new powers for Wales and Scotland, and deals for counties and city regions across the UK. A stated aim of these policies is to give local people greater say over the decisions that affect their lives.

Our findings show that whilst attitudes towards local democratic institutions are less negative than at the national, political level, the public still feel that they lack influence at the local level. This suggests that the existing channels for influence at the local level are also part of the problem. To give people more influence we need to devolve power to local communities *and* reform existing democratic processes and channels for influence so that they work better for citizens.

People are particularly negative about their ability to influence

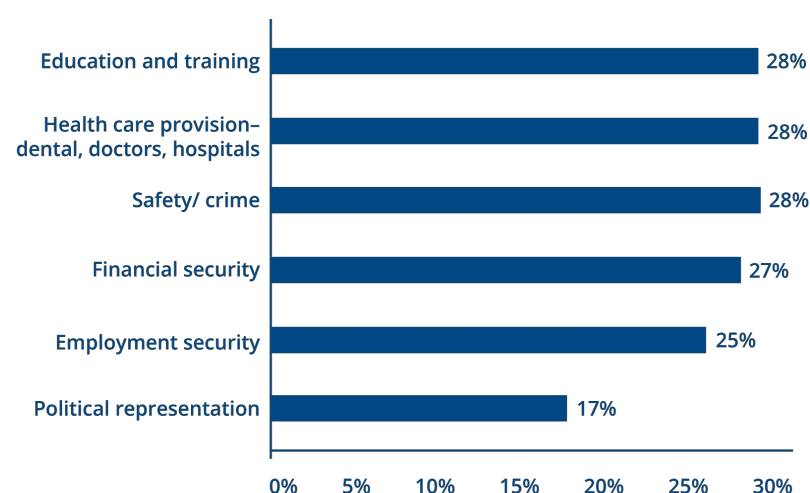
As figures 4 to 6 show, people are particularly negative about their ability to have influence through democratic processes (such as taking part in public consultations and contacting their MP). When it comes to the national, political level, for example, 38 per cent of people feel poorly represented, almost half (45 per cent) find it difficult to get involved, and 57 per cent feel they lack influence. Again, these findings are replicated when people are asked about their attitudes to other areas of public life.

The public also feel that they lack a general sense of political agency and efficacy. Only a

quarter agree with the statement *'when people like me get involved in politics they really can change the way that the UK is run'*.

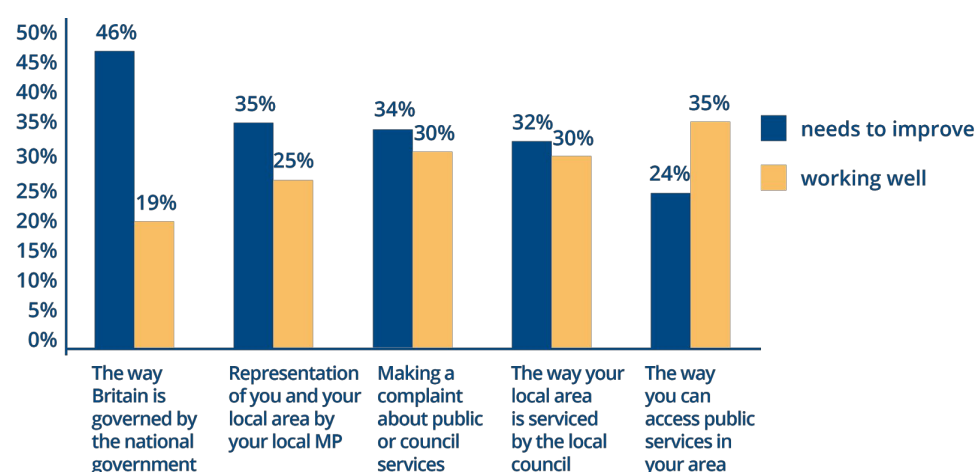
Democratic processes and channels for influence need to improve

People are more negative about democratic processes than they are about other aspects of their personal and public life. We asked how confident respondents felt about various aspects of their lives 5-10 years into the future. Political representation stood out as the area where people were least optimistic, even when compared to apparently more salient and emotive issues such as crime or health.



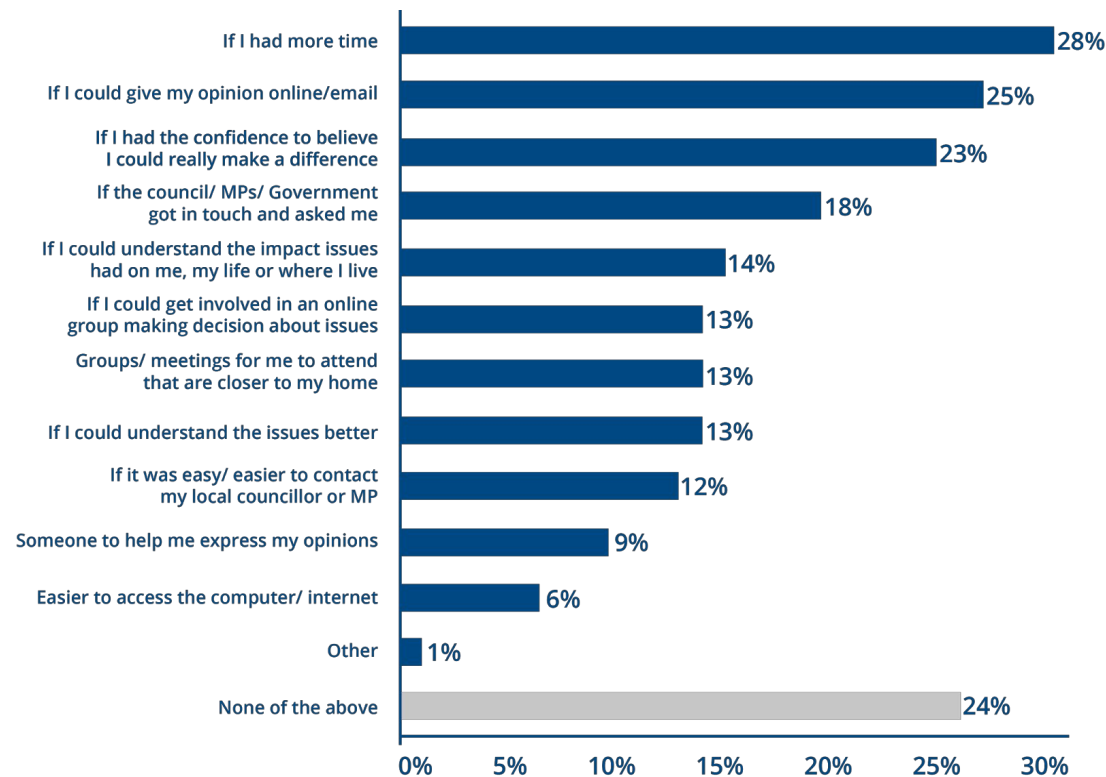
▲ Figure 7: Percentage who feel optimistic about different areas of their life over the next 5-10 years. Source: Civic Life Survey. Base: All respondents (2,025).

The public is also more likely to think that democratic processes and channels for influence are not working well and need to improve, than they are to say the same about the delivery of local services. And views are increasingly negative the more remote the process is from people's lives.



▲ Figure 8: Percentage who think different aspects of the system are working well or need to improve. Source: Civic Life Survey. Base: All respondents (2,025).

We asked respondents how they thought it could be made easier to become involved and help to influence decisions. The top three answers were having more time, being able to give opinions online or by email, and having the confidence to believe they could really make a difference. These responses suggest that democratic processes and channels for influence may currently be demanding too much from many citizens in order for them to participate.



▲ Figure 9: Percentage who selected different suggested ways to make it easier for them to get involved and influence decisions. Source: Civic Life Survey. Base: All respondents (2,025).¹³

¹³ Respondents could select more than one option

Part 3: People are frustrated by poor democratic processes

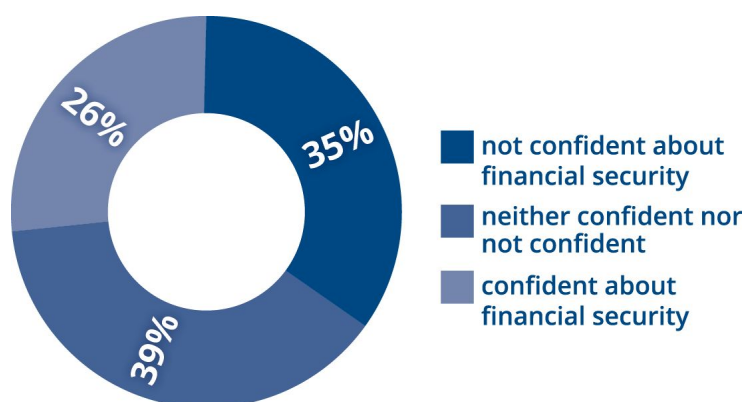
Many people told us that they didn't have the time or confidence to engage with democratic processes, or that they were inconvenient and took up too much energy. This was an even stronger view amongst those who were already lacking in time and confidence, either due to other pressures on their time, insecurities or their personality type.

We looked at two groups - the financially insecure and the assertive - and examined how they engaged with public life and democratic processes. We found evidence of two 'biases' in the design of democratic processes that make it difficult for many people to engage:

a. The financial security bias

"A simpler system and people who actually listen to you, that would make a change."

Having a sense of financial security is associated with more positive attitudes towards democratic processes. We asked respondents how confident or optimistic they felt about their financial security over the next 5-10 years. Just over a quarter (26 per cent) of respondents reported feeling confident about their financial security over this time, while just over a third (35 per cent) do not feel confident.



▲ Figure 10: Percentage who feel confident/not confident about their financial security over the next 5-10 years. Source: Civic Life Survey. Base: All respondents (2,025).

Financial concerns are also the focal point of people's daily worries. We found that having enough money to provide for your family's future is a daily concern for 44 per cent of people. Similarly, 40 per cent of people have day-to-day concerns about not having enough money saved for a rainy day; the same proportion worries about not having enough money at the end of the week to buy food and other essentials.

We labelled the 35 per cent of people who lack confidence about their financial security into the future 'the financially insecure', and explored how a sense of financial insecurity affected attitudes towards democratic processes and channels for influence.

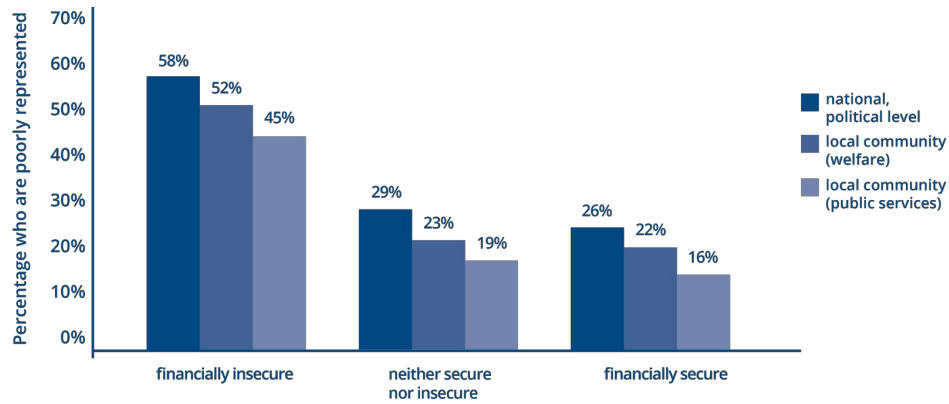
We found that the financially insecure had notably more pronounced negative attitudes towards democratic processes and public life.

The financially insecure feel poorly served by public life

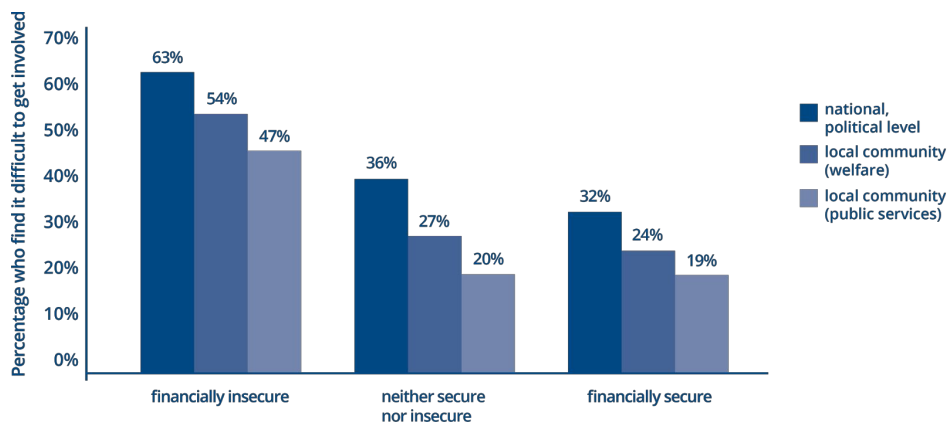
Many of the people who come to Citizens Advice for help solving their problems are likely to be financially insecure. One of the biggest issues we deal with is debt, and many of our clients lack good financial capability skills. A large proportion of the issues we deal with relate to benefits, and people who are out of work are overrepresented amongst our client base. But being financially insecure is not limited to those on low incomes; one in ten (11 per cent) of those with the highest household incomes also lack confidence about their financial security.¹⁴

Our survey found that those who feel financially insecure are more likely to hold negative attitudes towards public life, whether in relation to the extent they feel represented, how easy it is to get involved, and how influential they feel. This trend is repeated across both local and national politics and, as we saw before, attitudes become increasingly negative the more removed people are from decision-makers.

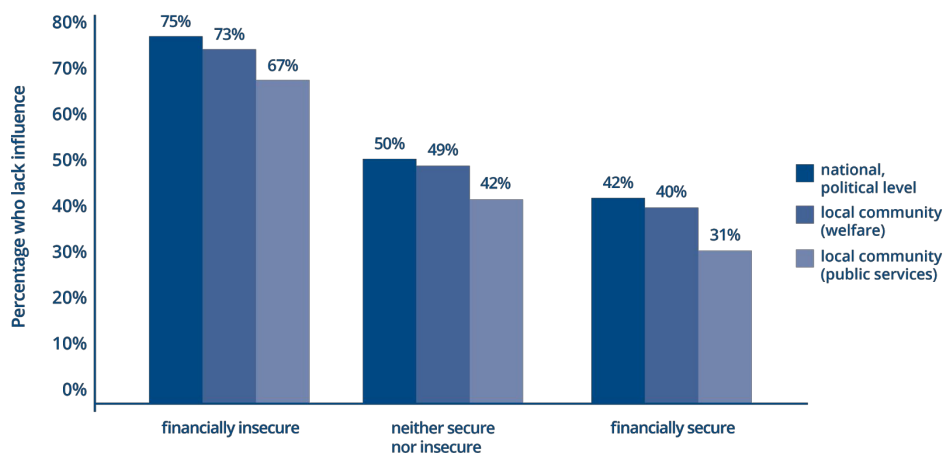
¹⁴ It should be noted that this is from a small base size: 27 people with household income of over £100,000



▲ Figure 11: Percentage who feel poorly represented in different areas of life. Source: Civic Life Survey. Base: All respondents (2,025).



▲ Figure 12: Percentage who find it difficult to get involved in different areas of life. Source: Civic Life Survey. Base: All respondents (2,025).

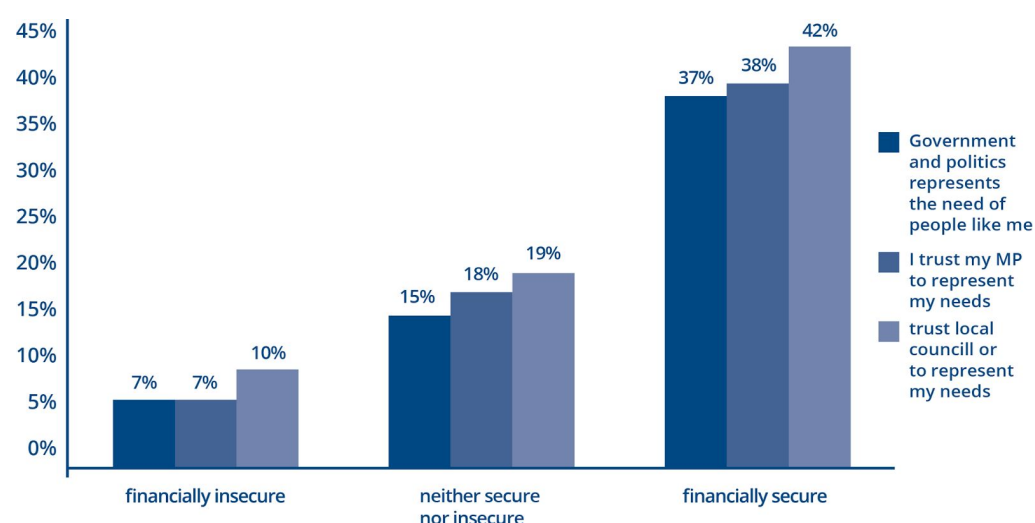


▲ Figure 13: Percentage who feel they lack influence in different areas of life. Source: Civic Life Survey. Base: All respondents (2,025).

The financially insecure also have a lower sense of political efficacy and think that democratic processes don't work for them

Those who are more insecure have a lower sense of political efficacy: just 17 per cent of the financially insecure agree with the statement '*When people like me get involved in politics they can really change the way the country is run*'. This more than doubles to 41 per cent amongst the financially secure.

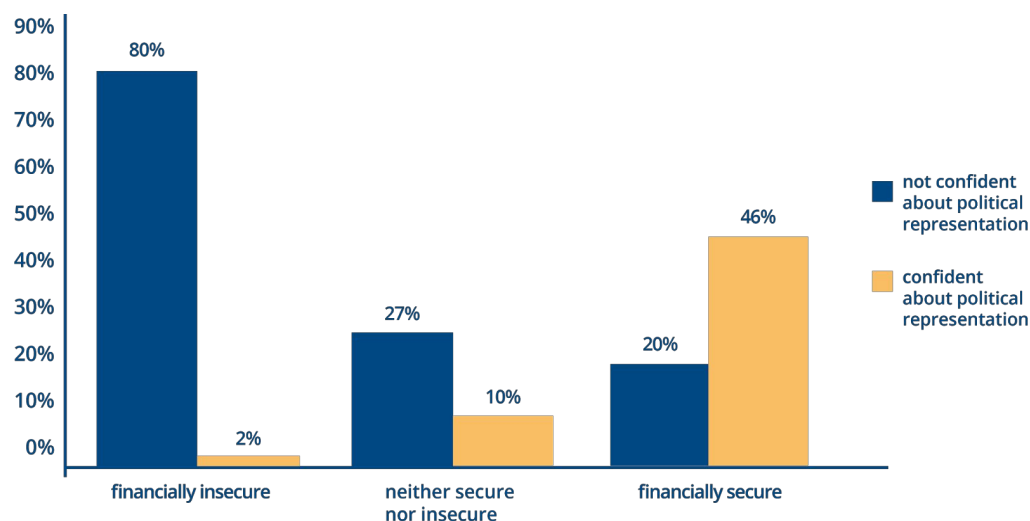
Financial security is also strongly associated with a sense of feeling represented by the democratic processes and institutions there to serve citizens, for example representation from MPs and Councillors. The more financially secure you are the more likely you are to trust that formal offices and institutions represent you: just 7 per cent of the financially insecure trust their local MP or a local councillor to represent their needs, for example.



▲ Figure 14: Percentage who agree with different statements about democratic processes. Source: Civic Life Survey. Base: All respondents (2,025).

And the financially insecure lack confidence in their future political representation

Confidence about political representation is strongly associated with a sense of financial security. Eight in ten of the financially insecure do not feel confident about their political representation over the next 5-10 years, compared to two in ten amongst the financially secure. A mere 2 per cent of those who are financially insecure are confident about their political representation, compared to almost half (48 per cent) of the financially secure who feel the same.



▲ Figure 15: Percentage who feel confident/not confident about political representation over next 5-10 years. Source: Civic Life Survey. Base: All respondents (2,025).

Do democratic process and channels for influence demand too much 'headspace'?

Why do the financially insecure consistently fare so much worse with respect to public life? Given the difficulty identified with influencing and engaging with democratic processes, those who are worrying about their future circumstances may feel they lack the time and mental energy to engage with issues and processes that are remote and frustrating.

Feeling financially insecure is likely to mean that you will be spending a larger proportion of your time and mental energy thinking about your financial situation and how it will be managed over the months and years to come. Like time, headspace is a finite resource, and the more of it that is spent pursuing one task or activity, the less there is left for another.¹⁵ Many democratic processes and channels for

Box 4: Citizens Advice and co-location

Local Citizens Advice offices practise and experiment with co-location in a number of different ways: we provide services from a variety of locations ranging from sure start centres, to surgeries, from libraries, to courts.

In the context of democratic engagement, some local Citizens Advice offices host MPs' or local councillors' surgeries on their premises. This enables us to provide a setting within which citizens who may not otherwise engage with their representatives can do so, and to offer a triage service where we can break down often multilayered and interrelated problems and signpost clients to democratic processes once a problem has been identified as one where that the central issue is one of lack of influence.

¹⁵ Mullainathan, S & Shafir, E. (2013) *Scarcity: The true cost of not having enough*

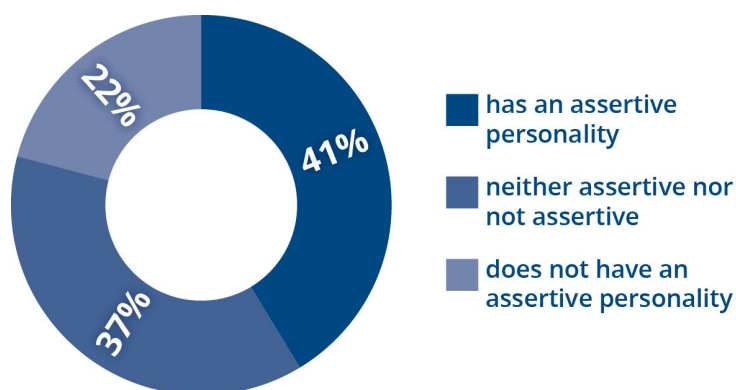
influence are too bureaucratic, remote, and difficult to navigate. This favours those people with the time, energy and wherewithal to master these systems; many citizens are not in this position.

The fact that the financially insecure have less headspace with which to engage with politics and democratic processes means that they find it more difficult to get involved and feel less influential when they do. If public life is going to work better for them, it needs to be simpler and more straightforward.

b) The assertive bias

"I cannot always express my opinions easily or clearly and sometimes feel that I am having my opinions swept under the carpet"

Personality traits affect participation and influence. We asked respondents about various aspects of their personality, to establish a psychometric 'profile' for various groups. In particular, we looked at people's level of confidence or 'assertiveness' when it comes to getting involved and voicing opinions: 41 per cent of people said that they had an assertive personality.



▲ Figure 16: Percentage who agree/disagree that they have an assertive personality. Source: Civic Life Survey. Base: All respondents (2,025).

Those who lack confidence are also poorly served by democratic processes. We found the 59 per cent of people who do not self define as assertive said they felt a lack of influence and rarely participate.

Low confidence is a key barrier preventing people from participating and having influence

"I have not got enough confidence to get involved. I feel that this is far too above me to get involved with"

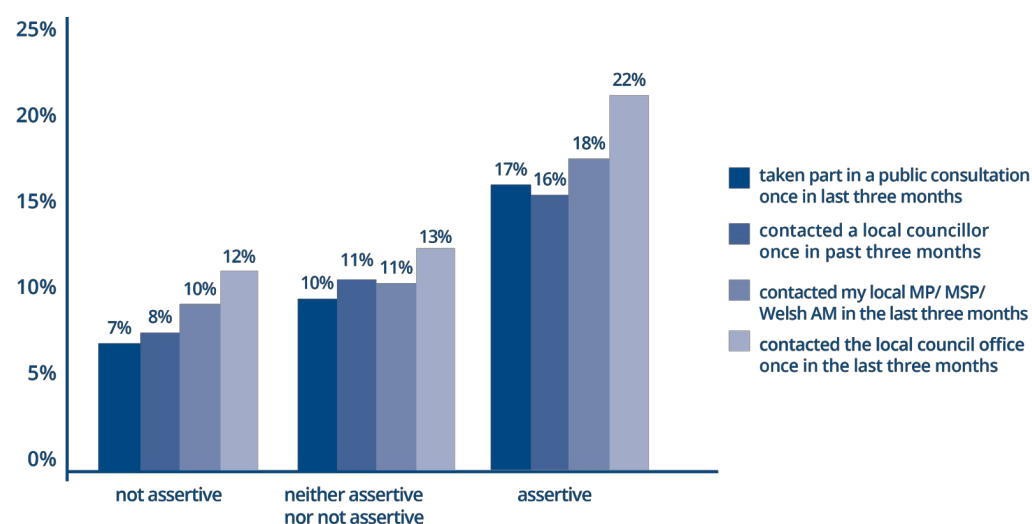
1 in 5 (21 per cent) people report not being confident enough as a barrier to getting involved in civic and political life (second only to lacking time which a quarter (26 per cent) of people recognise). Some people felt particularly intimidated when it came to national political issues, engaging with politicians or formal political processes such as public meetings or consultations:

"I don't understand politics enough to feel confident in voicing my opinions"

Across the board, we found that those who are assertive are more likely to participate, more likely to express opinions, or more likely to get involved than the 59 per cent of people who form the non-assertive majority.

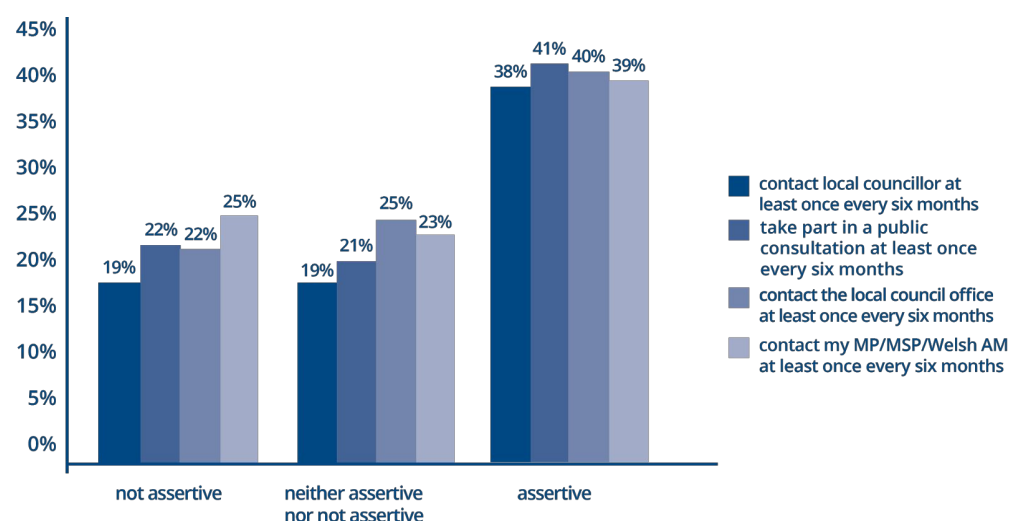
The assertive participate in democratic processes more, and more often

Those with assertive personalities are more likely to engage with democratic processes and channels for influence, such as public consultations or contacting the local council office. The assertive are almost twice as likely to have recently contacted their local MP, for example, compared to those who are not assertive.



▲ Figure 17: Percentage who participated in different democratic processes in the last three months. Source: Civic Life Survey. Base: All respondents (2,025).

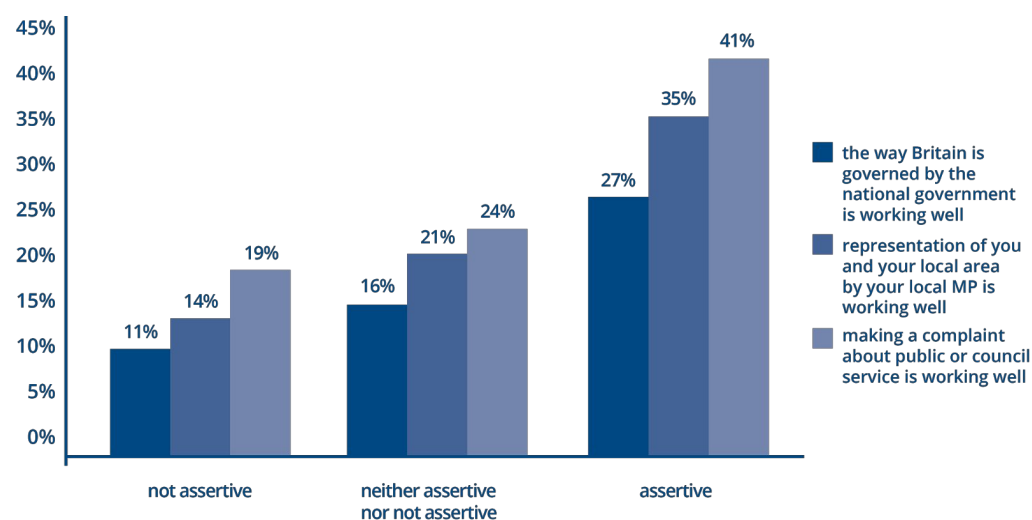
The assertive are also more likely to use formal channels for influence - such as taking part in consultations, contacting a local representative, or contacting the local council office - more often. Amongst those who have engaged with democratic processes, assertive people are more likely to engage at least once every six months, compared to the 59 per cent of people who are less assertive.



▲ Figure 18: Percentage who participate in different democratic processes at least once every six months. Source: Civic Life Survey. Base: vary by activity.

The assertive are more likely to feel that democratic processes work well

The assertive are far more likely to think that democratic processes are working well and don't need improvement. For example, 41 per cent of those who are assertive think that the system for making a complaint about a public or council service is working well, halving to 19 per cent amongst the non-assertive. This assertive bias is apparent across formal public life: from the way Britain is governed by the national government to the representation by local MPs.



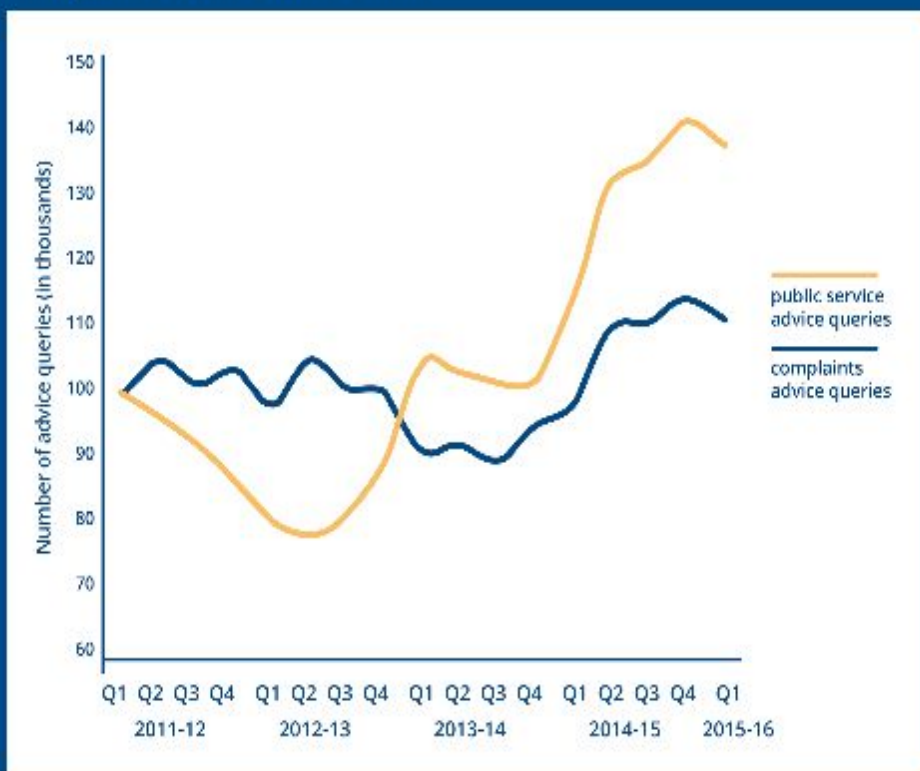
▲ Figure 19: Percentage who think different democratic processes are working well. Source: Civic Life Survey. Base: All respondents (2,025).

Box 5: The power of complaints

Over the last few years, Citizens Advice has seen a slow but steady increase in the number of people coming to us for help with a public service complaint (see Figure 20). In the last year we saw 14,014 clients with advice queries relating to public service complaints, compared to 8,460 in the same period four years ago; a rise of 60 per cent. A clear and responsive complaints system is essential to ensuring high quality public services, accessible to all.

The current system for addressing complaints (reliant on various 'ombudsmen' and local services), is inaccessible and complex. People may voice their frustration, but it is difficult for the system to respond and show how public services are changing as a result.

Citizens Advice research has looked at how social media often provides a modern means for people to complain about public services, from their local authority to national government agencies like HMRC. We are arguing for an improved public service complaints system, and highlight some of the ways in which complaints about poor service experiences can better be recorded, understood and fed into re-designing sustainable public services for the future.



▲ Figure 20: Change in number of clients seeking advice on public service complaints since 2011

Democratic processes and services need to fit with people's lives

These 'biases' mean that many people find it difficult to engage with and seek influence through formal democratic processes and services, such as consultations and complaints procedures. Citizens feel frustrated and alienated as democratic processes are unresponsive and frustrating to engage with, demanding time, headspace and confidence to push change through.

Making your voice heard about a local planning application, for example, shouldn't involve constantly scouring the council website for new consultations to respond to, or being informed about the existence of a consultation by chance and at the very last minute.¹⁶ And contributing to a council meeting should not only be for those with the time and confidence to stand up and speak in public. People lead busy lives and have different personalities, and many do not wish to 'do politics' full-time. Democratic processes should be reformed and reshaped so that they are accessible to everyone.

At Citizens Advice, we see the challenges people face when things go wrong. Every day we help over 7,300 people to solve problems - that's almost 2 million people every year in our local community services and millions more online and on the phone. We see how frustrated people can be when they are not able to fix something themselves, or get through on the phone, or get the information they need. Yet we also see how willing people are to help each other, to give their time to volunteer, and make a difference in their communities.

Democratic process and channels for influence should work for people and harness the commitment of the public to contribute to society and help each other. We need to reshape processes and services around how people live and behave.

¹⁶ See the case of the proposed 'Piccadilly Circus-style' advertising board in Brixton:
<http://www.brixtonblog.com/piccadilly-circus-style-advertising-boards-proposed-for-brixton/27325>

Part 4: Democracy that goes with the grain

Despite recent surges of energy and engagement, we face a democratic deficit. Party membership is in long-term decline, voting turnout is low and formal democratic processes are seen as irrelevant and outdated. Citizens feel frustrated and alienated as democratic processes are unresponsive and frustrating to engage with, demanding time, headspace and confidence to push change through.

Greater devolution to the nations, counties and city regions of the UK is likely to be part of any answer to the public's disenchantment with politics, but it is by no means sufficient. Rebalancing this deficit means making democracy work for people, reshaping processes and services around how people live and behave.

This means reforming the channels for influence that already exist so that they work better for all people everyday. The promotion and piloting of new democratic forums such as citizens' assemblies is a step in the right direction.¹⁷ But these innovations are likely to be periodic and only to include a sub-set of the population.

We need a democracy that is open and responsive to the values and experiences of the public everyday, and a politics that goes with the grain of modern life.¹⁸

Recommendations

There's no silver bullet, and different specific solutions will be appropriate in different settings, but we recommend some design principles that should guide local councils, public services and democratic institutions to ensure that the tools and services they offer make it easier and quicker for people to get in touch, and invite engagement through a range of different channels. We also offer some emblematic examples of each principle in action.

¹⁷ See <http://citizensassembly.co.uk/>

¹⁸ Gerry Stoker argues for a 'politics for amateurs' which would allow people to engage with democratic processes about the issues that matter to them, while retaining a life and without having to conform to idealised notions of what it means to be a 'model citizen'. Stoker, G. (2006) *Why Politics Matters: Making Democracy Work*

Democratic processes and channels for influence should be reformed and reshaped so that they provide easy access to public **information**, are **accessible** in the places where people go, and are relentlessly focussed on improving citizens' **experience** of engaging.

1. Information: All public information should be published and presented so that it is as easily accessible and understandable as possible

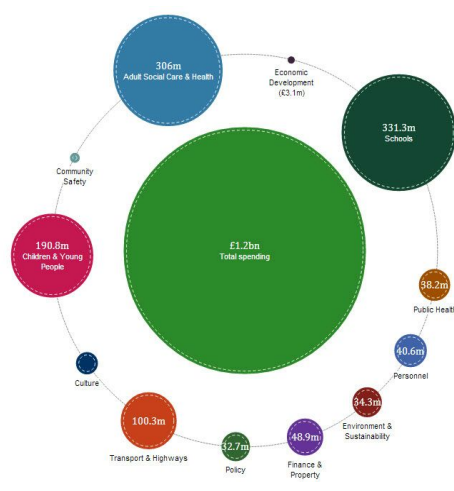
One of the most important ways to give people influence over the issues that matter to them is to ensure that they have easy access to relevant information, presented in a simple and understandable way. This is not the same as simply publishing all data on the internet, as finding and interpreting the right information can be a real challenge. Inappropriate presentation of information can put off people who don't have the time, headspace or confidence to find and navigate public information that has not been formatted or presented with the public in mind. More intelligent way of storing, cataloguing and presenting public data and information should therefore be explored.

The successes of the Government Digital Service (GDS) are widely recognised in this area, and it is welcome that GDS have begun to work with local government to improve digital service delivery.¹⁹ This work should include ensuring that information related to local democratic processes - such as consultation documents and complaints procedures - are as simple and accessible as possible.

Example 1: Nottingham County Council's spending infographic²⁰

Nottingham County Council has produced an interactive infographic to help residents better understand where the councils' income comes from and how that money is spent. The tool also allows you to click on many of the circles to zoom in further and see a more detailed breakdown of the income and spending areas.

At a time when councils' budgets are under increasing pressure, it is especially important that citizens are able to understand and scrutinise that expenditure.



¹⁹ See <http://www.localdirect.gov.uk/>

²⁰ See

<http://www.nottinghamshire.gov.uk/the-council-and-democracy/finance-and-budget/infographics>

2. Accessibility: Democratic processes and channels for influence should be co-located in the places where people spend time.

Making your voice heard and having influence over the issues that matter to you should be easy and convenient.

It follows then that democratic processes should be located in the places where people spend their time, for example in supermarkets, children's centres, in local Citizens Advice, or online. Exactly where you co-locate democratic processes will depend on the specific local circumstances and so differ from place to place.

Example 2: Dudley Council's Community Forums²¹

Dudley council have given people and communities greater access to councillors and the decision making process via the introduction of community forums. These regular drop-in meetings take place at community venues (such as schools and churches) across the borough and replace the old, outdated committee system.

As part of their drive to give local citizens greater access and influence, Dudley Council have also opened up their community forum meetings to engagement via Facebook and Twitter. This allows citizens to pose questions directly to the leader and deputy leader of the council. After a successful pilot of a Facebook community forum in 2013, the council has introduced the practice as a standard feature of its engagement strategy.

3. Experience: User experience and journey should be at the centre of all democratic processes.

Citizens' experience should be central to the design of democratic processes in order to invite engagement. Design tools such as user research and testing, prototyping and iteration have been applied in many areas of Government - particularly in digital and public service design and delivery - and these lessons should be applied to democratic processes and services.

Example 3: Digital tools and democratic engagement

78 per cent of adults in Britain accessed the internet once a day or almost once a day in 2015, rising from 35 per cent in 2006 when directly comparable records began.²² As we saw earlier, the second most popular suggestion to make it easier to become involved and help to influence decisions is to be able to give opinions online or via email. It is clear, then, that there is great potential to increase opportunities for online engagement with democratic processes, and a

²¹ See <http://www.dudley.gov.uk/community/community-forums/>

²² Office for National Statistics. (2015) Internet Access - Households and Individuals 2015 http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_412758.pdf

number of digital tools have been created to exploit this opportunity and ensure that the experience engaging with democratic processes is as simple and straightforward as possible.

mySociety²³ is a not for profit social enterprise that creates digital tools to enable citizens to exert power over decision makers. They run projects - such as WriteToThem.com and TheyWorkForYou.com - which aim to make getting involved and having influence simple and unremarkable for everyone. The user experience is at the centre of mySociety's tools, because the simpler and more user friendly the channel for influence, the more likely it is that people will use it to engage.

²³ See <https://www.mysociety.org/>

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